

Outside the Communist Party, memories of the 1989 massacre get hazy

AMONG journalists at a Chinese newspaper, there has been some surprising talk of publishing a story to mark the 20th anniversary on June 3rd and 4th of the massacre of hundreds of Beijing citizens by Chinese soldiers. One journalist even told his colleagues he would be ready to go to jail for doing so. But such bravado, especially if it proves more than rhetoric, is likely to be rare. For many in China the nationwide pro-democracy protests of 1989 and their bloody end have become a muddled and half-forgotten tale.

This does not stop the Communist Party worrying about the issue. It fears that the efforts of even a small number of people to keep memories alive could be destabilising. The most senior official to serve jail time for his role in the Tiananmen Square unrest, Bao Tong, has been escorted by security officials from his Beijing home to a scenic spot in central China (far from muttering journalists) where he will spend the anniversary period. Mr Bao agreed to go, says a family member. But in China an invitation from the police can be awkward to refuse. Several other dissidents report heightened police surveillance.

This year's anniversary has spurred a hardy few to pronounce on the massacre. A Beijing academic, Cui Weiping, told a gathering of intellectuals called to commemorate it that the party's campaign to deter public discussion of Tiananmen, and public acquiescence to it, had damaged China's "spirit and morality". She posted her remarks on her blog.

Another source of official concern was the recent publication abroad of a book containing the damning contents of tapes secretly recorded by Mr Bao's boss, the late former party chief, Zhao Ziyang, during his post-Tiananmen house arrest. The book portrays Mr Zhao as a victim of scheming hardliners and as a principled opponent of using force to crush the unrest (though he was not, until his house arrest, an admirer of Western-style democracy). A retired senior official has confessed that he and three others helped squirrel the tapes from Mr Zhao's confinement.

The party has also tried to deflect attention from the army's contribution to the slaughter. Twenty years ago the official media repeatedly sang the praises of dozens of soldiers killed during the "counterrevolutionary rebellion"—and posthumously considered "guardians of the republic". Now they are all but forgotten. Meanwhile, public support for the armed forces, which was badly damaged in 1989, appears to have rebounded. The army's rapid response to the deadly earthquake in Sichuan Province a year ago, a gift to party propagandists, played a part in this.

Twenty years after Tiananmen: Silence on the square

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When tanks roar through Tiananmen Square on October 1st in a grand parade to celebrate China's national day (the second such display since 1989), they will be greeted with widespread approval from a nation hungry for symbols of China's growing power.



But the party still betrays occasional signs of worry about the armed forces. Shortly before and after the mass killing in Beijing in 1989, there was widespread speculation that some in the army objected to it. Yet the prospect of serious dissent in the army proved largely unfounded. There is no hint in Mr Zhao's tapes that he had the support of any top brass. Nonetheless, in recent months the official media have published several articles denouncing calls (from whom is not specified) for the armed forces to be removed from the party's direct control. The party worries this would weaken its ability to count on them in the event of another Tiananmen-type crisis. The tone of these articles is oddly strident—perhaps suggesting this mooted reform has support within the armed forces.

The party's control is not absolute. President Hu Jintao launched yet another campaign this month against "extravagance and waste" among senior officers. For all such efforts, corruption within the armed forces remains widespread. But so too is corruption within the party. Mr Hu may enjoy nothing like the kind of prestige that China's late leader, Deng Xiaoping, had in the

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armed forces in 1989 when he ordered the troops into Tiananmen. But there are still few obvious signs of strain between the political and military leaderships. A rapid increase in the military budget in recent years has no doubt helped.

Among ordinary Beijing citizens, there is a generational divide on Tiananmen. Many who took part in or witnessed the unrest still grumble about the party's brutal response. But younger folk are often confused about the details of it. Many say they accept the party's line that the economic boom which followed has vindicated the armed forces' bloody intervention.

But once they've seen Paree...

Yet the only place in China where Tiananmen remains a public issue is its richest, Hong Kong. Thousands are expected to attend commemorative events in the territory. Earlier this month its chief executive, Donald Tsang, apologised after an uproar over his seemingly innocuous suggestion that many Hong Kong citizens believed Tiananmen "took place a long time ago" and that China had made "remarkable achievements" since then. Many in Beijing would certainly agree with Mr Tsang. But unlike those in Hong Kong, they have not tasted democracy.

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